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# Carrying Memory and Tradition: How Displaced Bodies Preserve and Transmit Khmer Cultural Heritage

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Saori HAGAI

## 1. Background

How are artforms learned and preserved when their transmission is disrupted by war? This chapter explores the experiences of Cambodian refugees, collectively referred to as the Khmer diaspora, who were displaced from Cambodia before, during, and after the Pol Pot regime of the 1970s. Specifically, it investigates how corporal representation of art anchored in *diasporic bodies* have maintained and transmitted the tradition of *robam boran*—Khmer classical dance—in new environments. With a history spanning over 1000 years, *robam boran* symbolizes “the highest in Khmer notions of beauty and identity” (Ok 2018, p.5). It is widely regarded as one of Cambodia’s most iconic cultural traditions, embodied as an enduring symbol of “Cambodian-ness” (Sellers, 2010, p. IX).

In *robam boran*, the teacher’s body serves as the primary instrument, embodying the essence of the art form and functioning as the central medium through which knowledge is transmitted across generations (ShapiroT 1994). Unlike other pedagogical traditions that rely on supplementary educational materials such as textbooks or visual media, *robam boran* has historically eschewed such resources, focusing instead on a deeply embodied, kinesthetic, and mnemonic approach to learning (SamCM 1987). The reliance on non-textual instruction is not merely a consequence of historical circumstances, such as the destruction of cultural texts during the Pol Pot regime, but a deliberate pedagogical choice rooted in the nature of the art form. It reflects learning in oral cultures, which has connection to

secrecy, power, and competition as well. The subtleties of *robam boran*—its gestures, rhythms, and spatial precision—cannot be adequately conveyed through theoretical descriptions or solo practice. Instead, these elements must be physically demonstrated, perceived, and embodied through repeated practice under the guidance of a teacher. Student attendance is not merely a formality but an indispensable component of mastering *robam boran*. By actively observing their teacher's movements and listening intently to instructions—even those directed at others—students develop a nuanced understanding of the art (ShapiroCS & Ok 2013). Despite historical upheavals and cultural displacements, the reliance on the teacher's body as the key instrument of learning has enabled *robam boran* to endure as a living tradition, passed down with precision and vitality. I argue that this corporal mode of learning has enabled a precise and yet artistic preservation of *robam boran's* techniques, ensuring its continuity as a living tradition despite the challenges posed by historical upheaval and displacement.

The analysis centers on the Khmer diaspora, highlighting their efforts to pass on cultural heritage in local community spaces. Long Beach, California, home to the largest Khmer diaspora population in the United States, has become a significant center for the preservation of *robam boran*. Residents in Long Beach have actively taken the initiative to sustain this tradition in a foreign milieu with the help of bodily memory that has transcended wartime dislocations. Notable figures include Sophiline Cheam Shapiro (hereafter SCS), a world-renowned dancer and producer of *robam boran*, who founded the Khmer Arts Academy (KAA) in 2002. Among her students was Prumsodun Ok, who became a choreographer and cultural ambassador, returning to Cambodia to establish Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA (PrumN) in 2015 as the first gay male *robam boran* troupe. This chapter compares these two diasporic dance theater schools, analyzing their continuity, divergence, and resilience. This chapter addresses the following two research questions:

1. How are histories and traditions, inscribed in dancers’ bodily expression, inherited and passed on to subsequent generations?
2. In what ways do diaspora dance activities confront traditional norms while finding timely ways for such embodied memories to be conveyed to the next generation?

## 2. Methodology

This chapter investigates the preservation and transmission of memory, philosophy, and discipline of *robam boran*. It focuses on the Long Beach area and two private dance schools, KAA and PrumN, which emerged in Long Beach and were later developed in Cambodia by members of the Khmer diaspora. In these case studies, I explore their continuity, transformation, and evolution. By employing a multi-method approach that combines historical analysis, fieldwork data, and interview findings, this chapter provides a comparative analysis of the two schools. The analysis highlights how *robam boran* has evolved through its transmission via diasporic bodies, showcasing the creative adaptations of the Khmer diaspora and the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in cultural heritage preservation. It examines their efforts to sustain and transmit *robam boran*, shedding light not only on the future outlook of *robam boran*, but also contestations about legitimacy that arise from innovation in new technique and identities unique to the community-led cultural preservation of the diaspora.

### 2-1. Historical Context

This chapter begins by outlining the political instability in Cambodia during the 1970s, which resulted in widespread migration and the establishment of Khmer diaspora communities in the United States. Drawing on prior research, this section contextualizes the sociopolitical

forces that shaped the displacement and resettlement of the Khmer diaspora, as well as their capacities and strategies for cultural maintenance.

## **2-2. Fieldwork Data**

The data examined in this study was collected through intermittent fieldwork conducted in Cambodia and the United States between 2003 and 2022. This fieldwork explores how the diaspora sought to build community bonds by preserving and transmitting classical dance in a context where returning to Cambodia was not feasible, and long-term settlement and cultural infrastructure development in the multiethnic environment of the United States was necessary.

## **2-3. Interviews**

Open-ended interviews, participant observation and other qualitative data collection methods were employed to gather insights from key figures associated with the transmission of *robam boran*:

**-KAA:** Direct interviews were conducted with both SCS and John Shapiro between 2003 and 2005 in Cambodia, followed by online interviews with them in 2022. The work of their institution was observed repeatedly in the intervening years.

**-PrumN:** Research on this institution began in 2017 and has been ongoing to the present day.

## **3. Defining the Khmer Diaspora in the United States**

As the Indochina wars escalated in the 1970s, various waves of refugees and migrants began being accepted worldwide, leading to the possibility of diaspora communities. A key period for Cambodia began in December 1978, when a faction that had broken away from the Khmer Rouge invaded Cambodia with the Vietnamese army, bringing an end to the dictatorship of

the Pol Pot regime. Following the regime’s collapse, countless Cambodians fled to the Thai border, where refugee camps swelled. Supported by the United Nations, interviews and procedures for resettlement in third countries were conducted, enabling many to emigrate via Thailand and the Philippines to destinations such as France, the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, and others. Despite the establishment of this resettlement process, conflict in Southeast Asia persisted, and the number of people seeking to leave the region remained significant until the early 1990s. Approximately 1.5 million people were displaced, with 51% (around 760,000 people) seeking asylum in the United States (Gordon 1987:153). Overall, it is estimated that around 250,000 Cambodians were displaced worldwide and between 1979 and 1983, some 152,000 Cambodians were accepted for resettlement in the United States (Smith-Hefner 1999:8).

The term “diaspora” originally referred to the forced migration of the Jews following the Babylonian Captivity but has since been broadly applied to people dispersed from their homeland by force or coercion. Because diasporas typically involve long-term separation, with little prospect of immediate return, Clifford (1997) argued “diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (p.255). In other words, diaspora signifies a state in which individuals are separated from their homeland, either geographically or culturally, but maintain some form of connection to it—whether real or imagined. Scholars have noted that the concepts of “diaspora” and “transnationalism” increasingly overlap. For example, Tölölyan (1991) observes that while “diaspora” was once reserved for groups forcibly dispersed—such as Jews, Greeks, and Armenians—it now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, and ethnic community (p.4).

The presence of a significant diaspora community has engendered

a debate among Cambodians about who is considered as an outsider (to Cambodia). Ratner's (2022) research, taking Ok as its subject, analyzes the discourse and tension associated with diaspora artists attempting to position (seemingly foreign ideas of) queerness within Cambodian cultural identity. Building on Hagai (2019), Ratner critically examines the classification of individuals such as Ok as "outsiders" to Cambodia. From one perspective, Ok should be considered an "outsider" to Cambodia, given his divergent political positioning and limited direct experience with the war and post-war periods in Cambodia. However, Ratner challenges this reductive framing, arguing that the Cambodian diaspora's connection is not diametrically external, but rather more nuanced, depending on diasporic identity and sense of belonging. While the classification of diaspora artists as "outsiders" in their home countries is open to debate, it is undeniable that these artists operate outside the cultural frameworks that historically nurtured their traditions. Although the cultural framework in Cambodia has itself evolved due to wartime disruption and globalization, I argue that the processes of their preservation, innovation and deviation in traditional performing arts emerging from the diaspora are influenced by their host society.

It is therefore essential to examine the sociocultural contexts shaping audience reception in host societies, but also to consider the embodied practices of diaspora artists that may strongly inherit and respect historical conventions. In Long Beach, for example, dance performances attract diverse audiences, not exclusively Cambodian. And as a consequence, within Cambodian diasporic communities, the traditional contexts that once framed these art forms are often not necessarily preserved. This highlights how artists like Shapiro and Ok navigate creative expression in vastly different environments from their homeland, even as they openly anchor their artistry to historical dance practice. Their work reflects an ongoing negotiation of identity, tradition, and contemporary realities within intersecting global and local frameworks. A deeper exploration of these

dynamics offers critical insights into the evolving nature of diasporic cultural expression in a globalized world.

The Khmer diaspora in the United States can be broadly categorized into three major groups based on their time of arrival. While these categories are interrelated and the distinctions are not always clear-cut, this classification still serves as a valuable reference point for understanding cultural background and motivations.

1. **The 75 People:** Those who arrived in 1975, the year the Khmer Rouge seized Phnom Penh (Needham and Quintiliani 2007: 37).
2. **After 1980 People:** Those who immigrated during the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime (ibid., p. 37).
3. **Recent Immigrants:** Individuals who arrived more recently due to factors such as marriage or family reunification policies (Asahi 2009: 334).

While recognizing the complexities and interconnections within these groups occasionally, for the most part in this paper, all Cambodians who immigrated to the United States after 1975 are collectively referred to as the Khmer diaspora.

#### 4. Dwelling in Displacement — “Being American,” “Becoming Cambodian”

This section explores the question of how people compelled to migrate have managed to adapt to the sociocultural environments of their host societies while simultaneously preserving their collective cultural identities. This section explores James Clifford’s *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), which offers relevant insights on this evolving experience. Clifford argues that the process of “becoming indigenous”

often relies on the performativity of cultural, artistic and ritualistic practice, both for internal (community) expression and legitimation for external audiences. The focus of his discussion is on indigenous peoples, who have historically been displaced by modernization, colonial domination, and political machinations. In new lands or territories, they are often subjected to assimilation policies that pressure them to abandon their indigenous identities in favor of being accepted as “national citizens.” Despite such oppressive circumstances, he documents how communities often seek external recognition of their indigenous identities through activities such as festivals, publications, films, tourism initiatives, performing arts, art creation, exhibitions, artifact production, and ritual observances. By perpetuating their traditional cultural practices despite practical and political hindrances, these groups show their commitment to maintaining or reclaiming their indigenous identities. In this context, the inheritance and reproduction of traditional culture serves as a medium to assert a group’s identity to the external world. Simultaneously, it acts as a performative practice within the community, reaffirming their shared uniqueness. As such, such performances are political acts encompassing both artistic and ritual dimensions, described as relation of “showing and telling” (ibid., p.47).

“The work of cultural retrieval, display, and performance plays a necessary role in current movements around identity and recognition ... Heritage projects participate in a range of public spheres, acting within and between Native communities as sites of mobilization and pride, sources of intergenerational inspiration and education, ways to reconnect with the past and to say to others: “We exist”, “We have deep roots here,” and “We are different” (ibid., p. 223).

While Clifford’s examples focus on indigenous peoples, his arguments hold relevance for the diaspora communities examined in this paper. They



share the experience of displacement under political pressures, the need for identity maintenance and legitimation, all of which establishes a common ground for comparison.

“The language of diaspora is increasingly invoked by displaced peoples who feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home. This sense of connection must be strong enough to resist erasure through the normalizing processes of forgetting, assimilating, and distancing. Many minority groups that have not previously identified in this way are now reclaiming diasporic origins and affiliations” (Clifford, 1997: 255).

The above discussions highlight how diasporic communities, compelled to dwell in displacement, actively resist the erasure of their ties to their homeland. They unearth their cultural origins, reconstruct traditions within new contexts, and strengthen communal bonds. In situations where physical return to the homeland is not feasible, their focus on rituals, traditional performances, and symbolic artifacts is a natural, if fraught, response. Giuriati (2005) argued that for people exiled from their homeland, questioning what constitutes their ethnic identity and cultural foundations is inevitable. Their longing for home is amplified through practices such as traditional music, dance, weddings, and funerals (Giuriati, 2005: 130-131). Sam-Ang (2001), a Cambodian diasporic scholar and ethnomusicologist based in the United States, documented parallel efforts in cultural preservation among the Khmer diasporas. His study revealed that, as early as the immediate post-migration phase, musicians and dancers initiated activities to sustain their cultural heritage, hoping to maintain cultural ties with the homeland (p.64). These artists, shaped by U.S. immigration policies of the 1980s, were dispersed across states such as California, Massachusetts, Florida, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Minnesota. In each

of these locations, they upheld the tradition of *robam boran* and established several dance schools throughout the country. This illustrates how the Khmer diaspora, while integrating into American society as “citizens,” strived to develop a model for memorializing and actively living the essence of being Cambodian. To deepen this macro-level analysis, I begin with an overview of two symbolic diaspora private dance schools.

### **5. Sophiline Cheam Shapiro’s Dance Philosophy at Khmer Arts Academy**

The Khmer Arts Academy (KAA), founded by SCS in Long Beach in 2002, serves as a platform for the younger Cambodian generation living in Long Beach to engage with *robam boran* and explore their cultural identity. KAA stands out as a central institution among these schools due to SCS’s leadership, originality, and her existing esteem as a dancer in Cambodia. In 2006, KAA established a Cambodian branch, the Khmer Arts Ensemble (KAE), near Phnom Penh. Subsequently, in 2014, KAA and KAE were merged to form the Sophiline Arts Ensemble (SAE) in Phnom Penh. Although KAA, originally based in Long Beach, was absorbed by SAE, SCS has remained involved in the continuity of *robam boran* practices outside of Cambodia as well. In this paper, I will refer to the diaspora private dance schools led by SCS collectively as KAA.

The second school is Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA (PrumN), a Cambodian dance school founded in 2015 and closed in 2023 by Ok, a graduate of KAA. While both male and female dancers were allowed to perform in temples during the reign of Yasovarman I (889–910) (Cravath 2007:50), the notion of “women’s supremacy” in court dance—conceived in the 19th century (Nut 2015) and later adopted and institutionalized after the French protectorate—has largely restricted the inheritance of *robam boran* to women. In contrast, Ok, drawing from the educational philosophy he learned from SCS, did not exclude dancers based on biological sex or

sexual orientation. PrumN demonstrated how art can challenge societal norms and expand cultural traditions. By fostering inclusion and innovation in Cambodian classical dance, the company not only redefined the art form but also carved a path for future artists to engage in cultural evolution and social progress.

### 5-1. Shapiro's Biography

Born in Phnom Penh in 1967, SCS experienced the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime, including massacres and forced labor, losing her father, two brothers, and relatives to starvation and death from exhaustion. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge and the establishment of the Heng Samrin government, which reopened the arts schools, SCS quickly enrolled in 1981. At the time, the few surviving *robam boran* teachers were focused on reviving the performances from memory and passing them on to the next generation. Her uncle, Chheng Phon, who served as Minister of the Ministry of Information and Culture (now the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts) from 1981 to 1990, played a significant role in the cultural revival of Cambodia after the genocide. Influenced by her uncle, SCS was exposed to *robam boran* and other performing arts from an early age. SCS graduated from Royal University of Fine Arts, Faculty of Choreographic Arts, Department of Dance, Classical Dance Course (RUFAC) - Cambodia's leading institution for dance education - in 1988 and, for the next three years, taught *robam boran* technique while also performing as a professional dancer. Her performances took her not only throughout Cambodia but also on tours in the Soviet Union, Vietnam, India, and the United States.

In 1991, following her marriage to John Shapiro, she moved to the United States. While raising two children, SCS earned a Bachelor's degree and completed the coursework for a Master's program in World Arts and Cultures at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles). Realizing the need to establish a cultural foundation for the Cambodian diaspora in the

United States, she founded KAA in 2002. However, her journey was not without challenges. Initially, the Shapiros practiced in their guest room and backyard (Su 2021:49). Later, they established a practice space off the corner of Anaheim Street and Obispo Avenue in Long Beach, where their activities continued. SCS, as a dance teacher and choreographer, has taken on the responsibility of practical instruction, while her husband, John Shapiro, managed financial and administrative tasks. In an interview with John Shapiro, he shared the following:

“As a couple, we chose for my wife, who is an essential and outstanding bearer of *robam boran*, to move from Cambodia to America. Since we are living in the United States, I promised to support her as much as possible in maintaining her connection to *robam boran*, to the best of our ability” (Interview with John Shapiro, December 13, 2003, Phnom Penh).

As previously mentioned, the Shapiros established KAA in Long Beach, an immigrant city, creating a space where the Cambodian community could connect with their cultural roots. However, from the quote above, it is clear that the establishment of KAA was not solely for the benefit of Cambodians living in America. It appears that for SCS, both as an individual and as an artist, it was essential to create a space where she could maintain her individual expression. In fact, teaching *robam boran* to the Cambodian community, forming a community around KAA, and engaging with concerns in the diaspora community led to the creation of the original dance work *Seasons of Migration* in 2005. This work was later made into a documentary film of the same name (see Figure 1), which received widespread international acclaim.

A story from *Seasons of Migration* unfolds as follows: One of the main characters, *Neang Neak*, is the daughter of a naga (serpent) with a long tail.



Figure 1. Documentary Movie *Seasons of Migration* (2006)

Source <https://www.media-generation.net/DVD%20PAGES/Seasons/Seasons.htm>

The heavy and long tail symbolizes the past that she carries throughout her life. The serpent, a creature that inhabits both water and earth, is capable of bridging the two worlds and does not shy away from movement. At first, *Neang Neak* is unaware of the weight of her tail and enjoys her new environment. However, over time, she finds herself unable to reconcile the burden of her tail (her past) with the happiness she has found in her new life. She begins to view her tail, which has become a hindrance, with disdain. She attempts to tear it off but finds she cannot cut it off or let it go. Removing a part of her body causes pain. Eventually, *Neang Neak* comes to realize that the tail is an essential part of what makes her who she is. In the end, she accepts her tail, and with it, accepts her identity. The message of the play ultimately conveys acceptance rather than rejection or exclusion. The motif of this play reflects the awakening of consciousness about “otherness” as a Cambodian immigrant in America, the negotiation between the past and present, and the human condition as people face various challenges and must constantly adjust throughout a fluid life journey, such as migration. *Seasons of Migration* addresses issues that are not only relevant to SCS but also to many diasporas who have faced similar realities upon immigration. In

this sense, the work is contemporary and practical, but also creatively rooted in Khmer cultural history.

The play uses elements of *robam boran*'s stylistic beauty (choreography, gestures, costumes) and metaphors, such as the naga serpent, to convey its message. It fits within the genre of *robam boran* in this technical sense. However, this play is notable for its transgressive nature, bridging both the traditional *robam boran* style and contemporary dance. The issue of migration, a central theme of the play, stands in stark contrast to traditional mythological stories commonly performed in Cambodia, where mythical characters move seamlessly between realms of heaven, earth, and sea. In Cambodia, it is rare, and perhaps even unwelcome, to create new works that transcend the boundaries of historical genres (Tuchman-Rosta 2014:538). Here, the important dimension is that, in America, SCS was able to innovate, explore, and create an artistic work in the style of *robam boran* that departs from Cambodian conventions in terms of content. Through KAA, she was able to flourish as an artist with new material. And in fact, SCS continues to create works that address original themes such as Cambodian politics, power, gender discrimination, and tradition, sometimes even engaging Western reference works, such as Shakespearean plays. An example of such boundary-breaking work is *Phka Sla* (2016), which deals with forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge regime, a piece which won wide recognition. In 2006, she won the Nikkei Asia Prize, further cementing her international recognition as an innovator in the arts.

## 5-2. Shaping Minds Through Apprenticeship at KAA

KAA has played an essential role in developing SCS's artistic sensitivity and served as an important contact zone for sharing issues with others. This is relevant in light of what John Shapiro observed (see quote above), noting they would support *robam boran* "to the best of our ability." As mentioned earlier, KAA merged with KAE to establish SAE in 2014,

signaling a fresh start primarily in Cambodia. This merger was driven by financial challenges that KAA had faced. For many years, KAA operated as a non-profit organization, primarily funded by grants from art promotion organizations based in both the U.S. and Cambodia. For example, KAA received artistic support from the Spunk Fund, a private foundation based in New York, and the Khmer Buddhist Foundation, a non-profit in San Jose, California, that has been active for over 40 years.

What sets KAA apart from dance training often found in Cambodia is the tuition-free model (see a comment from Mea Lath, a former directing manager of KAA <https://lbpost.com/hi-lo/art/it-transcends-language-young-khmer-dancers-keep-ancient-art-alive/>). The tradition of transmitting knowledge without involving a financial transaction is likely influenced by the teaching model at RUFAC, where Shapiro learned *robam boran*. This model reflects the historical way of learning *robam boran*, passed down since the time of the Cambodian court. In the long history of *robam boran*, artistic transmission has emphasized the importance of the teacher-student relationship, where respect, gratitude, and trust, rather than payment, are reciprocated by the student (Hagai 2024). Given the socio-economic conditions of the Cambodian community at the time, it is likely that many families did not have the financial means to pay for dance lessons, further underscoring the value of the non-monetary approach.

One of the characteristics of learning *robam boran* is the teacher-student rapport embodied in the practice of *sampeah kru*. *Sampeah* is the hand gesture for prayer, and *kru* refers to the teacher. The term signifies offering respect to the teacher, not only to the living teacher but also to the ancestral masters who have passed away. These figures, who have become deities of the arts, are revered as transmitters of artistic knowledge, memorialized continuously for helping to pass on their teachings through subsequent generations. The significance of this ritual is not limited to school practices but is an internalized value for dancers, as reflected in the

following excerpt:

“...some individual dancers—starving and separated from family and friends as nearly the entire population was under the rule of the Khmer Rouge—risked their lives by trading precious grains of rice for incense and praying to the spirits and teachers (*kru*) of the dance to guide them out of this horrific torment” (Shapiro-Phim, 2008:59).

This narration demonstrates that, in the context of *robam boran*, masters and teachers are seen as a source of refuge during difficult times, offering guidance and support even when students face life challenges. At KAA, there are no strict written admission requirements or a selection committee for candidates. Decisions regarding student selection, curriculum, and operational policies are made at the discretion of Shapiro. Over the course of 20 years, at its peak, around 60-65 students per year at KAA learned *robam boran*, and the training space was often filled with students (Su, 2021:52). Shapiro emphasizes the importance of how students respond to technical instruction, but also their interests and personal engagement. She believes that dancers should be assessed based on their technical abilities and eagerness to learn, rather than being judged by structural characteristics such as their gender or sexuality. She expressed this in recent years:

“What I focus on is how students respond to technical instruction and how much curiosity and imagination they bring to their learning. Therefore, dancers should be judged based on their skills and potential, rather than their gender or sexuality.” (Digital correspondence with SCS, December 11, 2017).

SCS’s educational philosophy contrasts with the approach of RUFAC, Cambodia’s highest institution for artistic education which has strict criteria



for admission based on age, gender and other characteristics. For instance, RUFAC’s entrance requirements include physical characteristics such as height and weight, whereas SCS’s view is more flexible. She accepts students from around the age of four, when they can dress themselves in training clothes, and also welcomes adult learners. Her philosophy is designed to make dance education as accessible as possible for the Cambodian community living in the United States. This approach stands in stark contrast to RUFAC’s traditional belief that only women can carry on the dance heritage. In an interview, I asked SCS whether there was any conflict in accepting Ok, a gay man, into her school. SCS responded firmly yet gently, adjusting my perspective:

“I have known Prum since he was young, and I knew about his sexuality even then. He would often visit my training space, following his younger sisters. Eventually, he asked me to teach him to dance. His body responded well to my instruction, and he quickly showed remarkable progress. I did not accept Prum because he is gay. I accepted him as a student who demonstrated solid ability and technical skill.” (Digital correspondence with SCS, December 11, 2017).

The fact that *robam boran* education was accessible to the Cambodian diaspora community in the United States is significant but also opening to heterodox participants is an additional layer of cultural evolution. If Ok had been applying to RUFAC, his entry would likely have been rejected due to his biological sex. Fittingly, SCS’s position as a graduate of RUFAC means that Ok, despite being a male dancer, was still able to acquire the solid technical skills associated with RUFAC’s lineage and embodied in *sampeah kru*. Supported by his mentor’s open educational approach, critical creativity, and innovative spirit, Ok honed his skills. At KAA, not only Ok

but also other male applicants have been welcomed. As discussed earlier, in *robam boran*, the teacher is seen as a source of refuge during difficult times in a student's life, a place to seek help and guidance. Shapiro, who has known Ok since childhood, played a pivotal role in his development by providing encouragement, support, and discipline when needed. During key transitional periods in Ok's life, SCS remained a steadfast mentor, offering consistent guidance and support. This close teacher-student relationship became the foundation for Shapiro's success in not only mentoring Ok but also cultivating a new generation of professional *robam boran* dancers.

## **6. Cambodia's First Gay Classical Dance Company**

### **– The Philosophy of Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA**

Ok is currently one of Asia's leading young dancers, frequently featured in global media outlets such as TED talks, where prominent figures from around the world share their insights (see Figure 2). This section discusses Ok's biography, the establishment of PrumN, his teacher-student relationships, and the inheritance of dance techniques.

#### **6-1. Ok's Biography**

Ok was born in 1987 in Long Beach as the child of Cambodian refugees. His parents had fled to the United States in the early 1980s, and Ok was born in the US. However, in 1991, when Ok was just four years old, his oldest sister, who had already been married, took her own life after suffering from domestic violence and depression. At that time, Long Beach was a community plagued by poverty, violence, and racial and cultural conflict, which hindered the development of its youth. Reflecting on his experiences, Ok observed that Long Beach faced intersecting problems of poverty, violence, and racial and cultural conflict, which further hindered the growth of young teenagers (Ok 2013: 76).



Figure 2. Ok at TED Talk (2015)

<https://wheninphnompenh.com/cambodias-first-lgbt-dance-company-prumsodun-ok-natyarasa/>

Ok himself became interested in *robam boran* during this period. He would often dress in his sister's clothes and perform dances for his family. By 2003, at the age of 16, he began attending KAA, where his sisters had previously studied. For the first year, he quietly observed the training, and in the following year, he decided to join. In 2004, Ok became KAA's first male student. After honing his skills at KAA, Ok began to establish himself as an independent artist in 2006 at the age of 19. However, his parents did not necessarily approve of his decision. As Cambodian refugees in America, his parents prioritized economic stability over artistic pursuits, driven by their concern that a career in the arts would lead to financial insecurity. Ok was not recognized by his family for his potential as a dancer or for his sexuality, and he found himself struggling with the issue of gender boundaries within *robam boran*. As a result, he began to distance himself from his family. In 2005, Ok moved to attend the San Francisco Art Institute, where he majored in experimental filmmaking rather than dance. However, his desire to fully pursue *robam boran* grew, leading him to drop out of the university in 2008.

Around this time, Ok made his first trip to Cambodia, where he discovered that the gay community was culturally and artistically invisible

within Cambodian society. This realization inspired him to create the performance piece *Dance Before the Twilight Sky* (2008), which illustrated the love and marriage of two male deities. His reinterpretation of the Apsara Dance, a piece featuring dominant female figures, also garnered significant attention, sparking debate and criticism. In this piece, which has been a mainstay of performance at RUFAC, featured Ok dancing bare-chested, without any costume on his upper body, emulating the Apsara carvings of Angkor temples. His approach stands apart from the mainstream of contemporary costume design, which would have been typical in RUFAC. As Ratner (2022) acknowledges, Ok's work seeks to pursue cultural authenticity by drawing upon historical traditions while simultaneously striving to incorporate his artistic expression. This dual engagement with preservation and innovation highlights the tension between adhering to established cultural norms and reinterpreting them through a modern artistic lens. In 2015, with support from the Multi-Arts Production Fund, Ok began to expand his activities beyond the United States, performing in Cambodia. However, this expansion also revealed the limitations faced by a male dancer dedicated to mastering *robam boran*. As Ok reflected,

“No matter how much I improved my skills, there was no place for me to showcase Cambodian arts in the American theater scene. Unlike ballet, *robam boran* in the U.S. didn't have a firmly established status, and it wasn't necessarily regarded as a high cultural art form. Rather, it was placed in a peripheral position as a tool for the Khmer diaspora to trace their culture and ethnic identity. Furthermore, in *robam boran*, which was traditionally passed down by women, I was the only male dancer, with no other male dancers to pair with. I had to create my own place for myself.” (Interview with Prumsodun Ok, July 4, 2019, Kyoto).

From this narrative, we can sense Ok’s strong motivation as an artist to carve out his own space—not only within the American theater scene but also within the world of *robam boran*, where no predefined place for artists such as him existed. To overcome these challenges, he had to create his own space, most prominently through expressions of his own body, much as post-war dancers have done during the war recovery period in Cambodia and abroad. In 2015, the Multi-Arts Production Fund grant supported a project that expressed the mythological union between the Khmer king and the naga master of the earth from the 13th century. For this project, PrumN began by featuring a gay male *robam boran* dancer in Phnom Penh. While following the stylistic traditions of Cambodian *robam boran*, Ok introduced a unique style that reflected his concerns about male-to-male love, minority rights, and diversity, themes that emerged during this period. In the audition, 10 candidates came forward, and after a 3-month training period, six individuals aged 18 to 23 were selected. This pioneering period also came with a common form of precarity in the arts. In 2015, PrumN’s began by providing a monthly salary of \$450 but maintaining this level of support was challenging and dancers slowly had to face the realities of the sector. While the candidates’ potential skill were the primary focus, their mental maturity and capacity to overcome numerous forms of adversity was also a key consideration in the selection process. Ok envisioned PrumN not just as a company that would repeat typical *robam boran* performances such as the *Ramayana*, but one that would address themes such as homosexuality, sexuality, and love, challenging social stigma in the process.

“The dancers who perform with PrumN were selected through auditions. While flexibility and technical skills were important, the candidates’ mental maturity was also taken into account. It is crucial for those in PrumN to be prepared to take on a social role as sexual minorities” (Interview with Prumsodun Ok, May 7, 2018, Phnom Penh).

For PrumN's debut performance, the dancers experienced not only intense nervousness but also a test of their readiness. This tension was not just because it was their first performance with PrumN, but also because it took place at a government venue managed by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in May 2016—a public space with added visibility. None of them had the opportunity to express their sexuality publicly in their performances. Ok reflects that for the young dancers, the debut performance was a moment of liberation and responsibility. It was an opportunity to break away from the past, where they had been hesitant to reveal their sexuality, and to express themselves through *robam boran*. For Ok, the social significance of PrumN lies in creating a space for these young gay male dancers on stage. This mission echoes the absence of space he once experienced himself.

## 6-2. Beyond Classroom: Nurturing Identity and Independence in the Teacher-Master Relationship

Next, I examine the master-disciple relationship within PrumN. As previously mentioned, Ok's expectations of his disciples extend beyond the technical skills of *robam boran* to include their mental readiness. Many of PrumN's disciples have struggled with not being able to openly share their sexuality with their families or friends and had spent periods without opportunities for self-expression. In response to these identity issues, Ok provided support by being deeply involved in their personal development as dancers, while also encouraging their personal independence (see Figure 3).

*“Robam boran is a mirror that reflects the aesthetic and order of Cambodian society, but none of the performances depict sexual minorities. Because our existence is not represented, we are misunderstood, stigmatized, and socially erased. I want to create a space within the tradition of robam boran for LGBTQ individuals”* (Interview with Ok, July 4, 2019, Kyoto).



Figure 3. Daily rehearsal of Ok and his apprentices

©Prumsodun Ok

From Ok's narrative, it is evident that through learning *robam boran*, the young dancers are provided an opportunity to positively embrace their sexual identities and attempt to create a sexual minority community. The desire Ok once felt for a sense of belonging has now translated into his efforts to create a space for his disciples on stage and in practice rooms. Indeed, the revenue generated from PrumN's establishment and performances not only supports the continuation of its artistic activities but also serves as a means for the students to achieve economic independence.

“*Neak Kru* Sophiline (Teacher Sophiline) always addressed me with kind words. I model my approach on the teacher-student relationship, treating my students as if I were speaking to my own children. *Sampeah kru* practices this daily before the training begins, though it's brief. Training takes place every day from 12 to 3 PM, with discussions or shared meals as needed. If my student is hospitalized, I also pay for his medical costs if necessary” (Digital

correspondence with Ok, December 3, 2020).

It is notable that Ok's teacher-student relationship includes expenses such as meals and emergency medical fees. For example, in Chinese Qin Opera Theater, there was a mutual aid system where disciples would provide unpaid household labor in exchange for the master's teachings and care for their living needs (Shimizu, 2018:8). In contrast, in the case of PrumN, there is no live-in arrangement nor unpaid labor from the disciples in return. For Ok, this means that food and medical expenses become additional costs. Nevertheless, Ok's ideal teacher model is based on SCS's altruistic behavior, such as using her own funds to establish and run KAA as a cultural hub for the Khmer diaspora. Ok has internalized the notion that the teacher-disciple relationship cannot be confined to the ethical boundaries of the classroom alone.

## **7. Discussion**

This chapter examines and compares the two diasporic dance schools, focusing on their continuity, divergence and resilience in how individuals navigate adaptation to the host society while simultaneously affirming and rediscovering the value of their cultural traditions. It explores how histories and traditions, embodied and inscribed within their practices, are inherited and transmitted across generations.

### **7-1. Continuity**

One of the key commonalities shared by the two diaspora schools lies in the establishment of a master-disciple relationship rooted in the concept of apprenticeship. From the late 19th to the early 20th century, the transmission of *boram boran* historically followed a specific model: disciples underwent years of rigorous training, including apprenticeship service, while



living within the court alongside their masters for an extended period. They acquired their skills by imitating their masters’ demonstrations and learning within an integrated community where education and daily life were inseparable. Within this communal learning environment, disciples engaged in an immersive process of discovery, exploring embedded knowledge alongside their peers. This approach to dance transmission was deeply rooted in the tradition of apprenticeship-based education in the performing arts. This form of education embodied a holistic approach, fostering the comprehensive acquisition of artistic skills (Groslier 1912, Cravath 2007, Hagai 2024).

KAA taught dance to Cambodian youth, and a defining feature of its founder’s approach is that she has never charged tuition fees. This model—where knowledge is transmitted without monetary transactions—likely stems from the RUFAC school, where she learned *robam boran*. RUFAC, in turn, has inherited this system from the court period. As established throughout this paper, in the long history of *robam boran* transmission from the royal court era, the act of a master imparting knowledge and a disciple learning is the fundamental step in forming a master-disciple relationship. The disciple’s “payment” for such guidance is not in the form of tuition fees but rather in the form of respect, gratitude, and trust. This system is also characterized by the altruistic values of the teachers, the long-term nature of training—including apprenticeship (the apprentice system)—and the deeply personal bond between master and disciple, which extends beyond the classroom and into everyday life. It is at this stage where conformity makes way for the independent expression of emerging dancers.

## 7-2. Divergence

One of the artistic ideals that SCS put into practice—and that Ok later followed—was the aesthetic of divergence. This is exemplified in *Seasons of Migration*, where SCS explores the diasporic experience in American society

through the lens of immigration. The long tail serves as a potent symbol of the self, deeply rooted in Cambodia's past—prior to migration to America. Ultimately, the narrative centres on acknowledging and embracing one's Cambodian identity, even amid a desire to sever ties with the past. This process aligns with Hall's (1990) assertion that "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 1990: 235). Situating Ok's story within this framework, the long tail can be interpreted as symbolizing both his migrant status and masculinity. Within the discourse of women's supremacy in *robam boran*, Ok's biological sex rendered him nominally ineligible. Perhaps, through her choreography and content, SCS sought to convey a narrative of self-acceptance and resilience, emphasizing the triumph over adversity by embracing one's intrinsic attributes.

The question of gender and sexuality in the training of apprentices in the dance intersects with contemporary discussions on LGBTQ+ issues. As noted, the RUFAC school system restricts enrollment to girls—a policy that warrants critical examination nowadays. Ideally, the debate over who should inherit the art of *robam boran* should center on the skills and artistic qualities of dancers, as well as their capacity to serve as respected ambassadors of culture. However, it has often been reduced to a simplistic gender binary, framing the issue as a question of whether men or women should carry on the tradition.

In contrast, diaspora dance schools have fostered a more expansive and essential discourse—one that prioritizes the transmission of inclusivity, artistic knowledge and technique over the gender distinctions. In this regard, the educational philosophy of KAA is particularly significant. Rather than excluding individuals based on sex or sexuality, it deliberately seeks to identify the essence of a dancer through their artistic expression. The inclusion of gay male dancers within this framework represents a new paradigm for the tradition—one that challenges the RUFAC notions of

inheritance and expands the possibilities of artistic expression. Moreover, it raises broader questions about the role of sexuality in the performing arts and, more fundamentally, within education itself. Notably, the emergence of a highly acclaimed *robam boran* dancer from the American diaspora likely had a profound impact on RUFAC. The transformation from SCS to Ok was not merely an intergenerational shift; rather, influenced by SCS’s open educational philosophy and ideology, Ok did more than simply inherit *robam boran*. He actively instigated both divergence—a consequential evolution—and transgression—a deliberate departure from tradition.

### 7-3. Resilience

The widespread inheritance of *robam boran* outside Cambodia can, paradoxically, be traced back to the devastation caused by the Pol Pot regime. The mass displacement of artists, teachers, and performers—many of whom were forced to flee—ultimately led to the survival and transmission of *robam boran* beyond its homeland. While this chapter has focused on SCS and Ok, they are one of many dancers who carried *robam boran* into exile. For instance, Kanika Mam, who studied *robam boran* in Cambodia from 1981 to 1989, relocated to France in 1994 and now leads a modern and progressive diaspora folk dance school *Selepak Khmer* in Lognes, outside Paris. These cases demonstrate that even when traditional performing arts could no longer be sustained within their war-torn homeland, refugees, immigrants, and members of the diaspora continued to practice and transmit their cultural heritage in third countries. Armed conflict, political persecution, and displacement have repeatedly severed the bonds between people and their cultural traditions—not only in Cambodia but around the world. Yet, in the Cambodian case, the bodies of individual dancers who have become part of the diaspora function as sites of collective remembrance, where the past is reconstructed and preserved. Separated both physically and institutionally from Cambodia’s RUFAC school system and existing outside

the framework of American public education, the diaspora has sustained the transmission of *robam boran* through the embodied knowledge and memories of surviving teachers within immigrant communities.

At the same time, *robam boran* in the diaspora functions as an unrelenting critique of the political violence and genocide that devastated Cambodia in the 1970s. The teachers of diaspora dance schools—SCS, Ok, Mam, among others—are individuals who lost family members, homes, and communities to ideological warfare within their own ethnic group. When they perform *robam boran* in third countries such as the United States or France, their movements do more than embody centuries-old traditions; they summon the haunting memory of genocide and force into view the histories that Cambodia's national narrative may seek to forget. As a living entity that has endured political violence, *robam boran* is danced in the diaspora as an act of resistance—against forgetting, against erasure. It serves as a means of remembering the harm inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, a way to honor the suffering experienced by their bodies, families, and compatriots. In every performance, *robam boran* asserts that even in exile, cultural heritage is not only preserved—it is wielded as a form of defiance, survival and power.

## **8. Conclusion**

Since the establishment of the Pol Pot regime in 1975, four decades have passed, yet the reverberations of that historical rupture continue to shape the trajectory of Cambodian culture. In her analysis of the Khmer diaspora in the 1980s, Giuriati (2005) offers critical insights that remain relevant to the ongoing discourse. Her observations provide a framework for interpreting the works of SCS and Ok as nuanced responses to the dynamics of displacement and cultural negotiation. *Robam boran*, as a living cultural practice, emerges as a dynamic space where preservation, transformation,

and deviation intersect, engaging with both the past and the evolving present. Giuriati (2005) notes, “different reactions and personal choices were made by individuals whose artistic interactions hopefully can create a bridge between the Khmer diaspora and Cambodians at home” (pp.141-142). This statement underscores the dual role of *robam boran*—simultaneously a repository of cultural memory and a vehicle for negotiating its evolving function within the contexts of both the diaspora and the homeland. The complex interplay between continuity and divergence within this art form reflects the multifaceted ways in which cultural traditions are reimagined, reinterpreted, and preserved amid migration and historical rupture.

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